

Creation of the Self: The Role of the Stomach and Spleen in Psycho-Social Development

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Through the process of metabolism we are continually recreating ourselves. The food we ingest, after undergoing a transformative process, becomes part of us. Protein becomes flesh, carbohydrates become energy, the chlorophyll of plants becomes blood. This is a magical, alchemical process occurring every day. It is necessary to sustain life.

Like the alchemical process utilized to transform lead into gold, our bodies use digestive "fire" to transform foreign substance into something that is precious to us: *qi* and blood. The purpose of internal alchemy is everlasting life: using unconscious, natural digestive capacity consciously to sustain life beyond the "normal" cycles of birth, growth, decline and death.

Classical Chinese Medicine is multilayered, always viewing the human organism through the filters of the physical and non-physical. This is the basic notion of *qi*. *Qi* represents all phenomenon. It is immaterial, yet can create material. It manifests in liquid form as *ying qi*. It also manifests in vaporous form as *wei qi*. *Qi* at its densest is *yuan qi*. *Qi* creates form: flesh and bone are manifestations of *ying* and *yuan qi* respectively.

To the classical Chinese, one cannot talk about the physical without also acknowledging the spiritual. Between these two states is the realm of the mental and emotional: the expression of interaction between *Jing* and *Shen*: the physical and spiritual - essence and spirit.



The mind and emotions live within the energetic "*ying*" level, represented by blood and fluids: the

liquid state of the body. *Ying qi* can be seen as relating to humanity, located between Heaven and Earth. *Ying qi* is the nutritive level of the body, which continually recreates the capacity to sustain life. The *ying* level creates *wei qi*, which interfaces with the external environment. *Ying qi* also creates post-natal essence to support pre-natal essence: our constitutional nature. Our place in the universe as human beings, living between Heaven and Earth, is sustained by *ying qi* that continually recreates us. *Ying qi* is the mediumship by which we continually recommit to being in human form.

Basic metabolic theory explains utilization of food and air as raw materials that we put into the alchemical fire of the stomach. The magical transformation of lead into gold is an alchemical metaphor for our digestive process: "separation of the pure from the turbid." It is refinement of foreign materials into highly purified essence capable of extending life.

The alchemy of physiological metabolism is explained in psycho-emotional form through the Confucian theory of psycho-social development. This theory explains how we create and recreate ourselves mentally and emotionally through interfacing with the social world.

The Primary Channels are conduits of *ying qi*. They are discussed in the *Ling Shu* as channels of daily circulation and nourishment. The psycho-social theory of human development explains, through the sequence of the 12 primary channels, how we are formed as social beings. It describes the process of becoming self-surviving and interactive. It also describes how we begin to see ourselves and the world. It is a process by which we create our personalities, as well as our external and internal realities.

The stomach is the basis of postnatal life. Its importance is emphasized in Chapter 10 of the *Ling Shu*. The Primary Channels begin with the lung channel, however the internal branch of the lung channel begins at "the center of the stomach." The stomach is "the origin of food and drink": the raw materials that sustain post-natal life. It is the origin of the Primary Channel sequence and the root of post-natal existence; the alchemical cauldron where transformation of food into post-natal *qi* and essence is initiated.

Many points along the stomach's primary channel possess names relating to reception and construction. It is through the food we eat that we gather resources to build our bodies. This process is mirrored on the mental-emotional level: we ingest the world so we can reflect upon it, influencing what is ultimately built.

From ingested raw resources, we build our *qi*. Jeffrey Yuen defines *qi* as "relationship." The *Jia Yu Jing* designates triple heater as the organ that governs *qi*. The *Nan Jing* details triple heater's role in fluid metabolism. To the ancient Chinese, water is life. It is through ingestion, governed by the stomach, that triple heater is able to direct the generation of *qi*, supporting development of relationship between ourselves and the world.

The lung, spleen and kidney are collectively seen as "the triple heater" in herbal medicine. The kidneys, representing the self, support the spleen as it reflects on the social self and interfaces with the external world via the lungs.

The stomach provides the strong descending energy needed to pull food into our bodies. It also supports the lung to pull air into the chest, needed for the final production of *qi*. The stomach's descent is described as a process of "welcoming" the material we ingest: food, drink, and sensory information. It is the first primary channel to connect to all the upper sensory orifices. Through the stomach, we see the world, and "welcome" it into our bodies via our mouth, eyes, nose and ears. The

stomach and lungs allow the initial connection to the external world: they bring the world inside so we can digest and reflect upon it.

As the channel descends onto the torso, names of the acupuncture points become images of building a structure: window, roof, beam, door, storeroom, abode. Most of the points with structural references are located on the chest: the residence of the spirit. We use our emotional resonance with the world to build our personalities, our lives and our perspective.

Confucianism is a philosophy that places special emphasis on connection to our ancestors. Our *Jing* is a reservoir of information we have inherited from our parents. Within the *Jing* is an agenda: a curriculum we are given to fulfill throughout our lives. It is always guiding us. Physiologically the kidneys support the function of the stomach and spleen: our social post-natal lives are directed towards certain situations and relationships so we may find opportunities to live out our Ming, or destiny. It is our blood, a form of *ying qi*, that attracts us to certain situations.

To the ancient Chinese, the *Shen* spirit circulates through the blood, and resides in the heart. The heart circulates blood, allowing the *Shen* to pull into our lives that which animates us: the heart descends into the kidneys, also pulling the world inward. Circulation of blood is like movement within our lives. The Luo Vessels illustrate where we have become stuck: overly or under-engaged with aspects of our lives. They are conduits of *ying qi*, manifesting in blood stasis when there is damage to the Primary Channels. Luo Vessels are an interruption to the circulation of our *Shen*.

The *Jia Yu Jing* designates the stomach as the organ that controls the blood. It is the origin of *ying qi*, creating the "red substance" that is ascended into the chest to become blood. It is the organ that continually finances the mediumship of our *Shen* as it moves freely in health, or stagnates and fixates as Luo Vessel stagnation.

Our emotions are a mode by which our *Shen* expresses itself. Emotional expression is seen as healthy and normal in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Emotions only become destructive when they are extreme, stagnated, insufficiently expressed, or maintained for long periods of time. Luo Vessels, being conduits of *ying qi*, manifest as psycho-emotional pathology. The Primary Channels represent the normal physiological development of mental-emotional function. Luo Vessels are manifestations of disturbances to Primary Channel mental and emotional function.

Psychologically, the stomach is the origin of feeling. It is responsible for the initial metabolism of mental-emotional material.

The stomach is the channel where we begin to have an emotional response to our environment. It is the development of like and dislike. The reasoning component of like and dislike begins to develop through the later spleen and heart channels: as context and desire. At the level of the stomach we generate an emotional response based on pure feeling.

Luo Vessel pathologically commonly shows extreme or insufficient states of Primary Channel function. When the stomach's luo is in a state of fullness, it is classically described as manifesting "mania": an especially strong, inappropriate emotional response.

When we are attracted to something, our legs begin to move us toward it. Even in our sleep, as we think about something, our legs begin to move. As soon as thought and intention are created, the nerves begin to fire around GV-4 engaging the lower limbs. Emptiness of the stomach's luo is

described as "weakness of the lower limbs." Without adequate emotional charge, we lose a sense of direction. Our Shen doesn't know where to point us; our legs lose the strength to walk in the direction of our desired destination. Emptiness of the stomach's *luo* is suggestive of a lack of clarity and initiative in movement. The stomach exhibits diminished ability in controlling the blood, causing directed animation of the *Shen* to suffer.

Through the stomach's initial emotional response to the world, the process of discernment begins. It is the initial step in identifying what we are trying to build. The stomach (supported by the yang of the kidneys and spleen) is the first organ to separate the pure from the turbid. If we have ingested something that is inappropriate or harmful, we will vomit it out. However, if the stomach has deemed the ingested material appropriate, it passes it into the small intestine where further separation of the pure from the turbid can continue, governed by the yang of the heart. The stomach's initial emotional response to stimuli is the basis for all subsequent psychological sorting processes.

Worry and unproductive thought can disturb the physiology of assimilation and conservation. Confucian philosophy believes all emotional disturbances result from a weak mind.

The spleen governs our mental capacity. It is the residence of the *Yi*, which is often translated as the capacity to reflect. Reflection is a necessary component in healthy development of the self. The yang of the spleen allows the rotting and ripening and transformation and transportation of the Earth element to occur. The yang of the spleen can be likened to the *Yi*: clear-minded focus, allowing separation of pure from the turbid. Just as the heart provides the yang for the small intestine's separation and assimilation of nutrients, the yang of the spleen does this for the stomach. The yang of the spleen also allows food essence to rise into the chest where it can undergo its final production into *qi* and blood.

Psychologically, the spleen provides context to situations. It is the story we tell ourselves: our place in society, how we reflect on ourselves, our families, our bodies. The stomach relates to the emotional aspect; the spleen to the mental. We develop our mental context based on the interaction between our social and internal worlds: the control-cycle relationship between the Water and Earth elements. The kidney, representing natural-essential nature ideally supports the social context developed by the stomach and spleen, expressed through our emotions and thoughts. The spleen controls the four limbs. It is the organ that provides *qi* for our movement in the world. How we think and feel is expressed physically through the movement our limbs. Thought creates action and movement: how we behave in the world.

The spleen "banks" the blood. Banking the blood creates the boundaries of our lives: the borders in which we live. It creates social context, and the beginning of our definition of ourselves: our place in the world. Ideally, the spleen is supported by the kidney, harmonizing social order with natural order: the ability to bring our true nature into the social world. However, the kidney and spleen have a tendency to be in conflict. This is built into our psycho-social development. It is through this conflict that we learn about ourselves and the world, developing the virtue to respect the rituals of society associated with the Earth element.

The spleen's *luo* manifests somatically as pain in the abdomen when "full," and as "drum-like" distention when "empty." The thinking process is like digestion. Thoughts must be broken down, assimilated and/or eliminated, achieving complete separation of the pure from the turbid. Incomplete transformation and transportation can lead to stagnation and damp accumulation: psychologically manifesting as habitual thinking or obsessiveness. Like insufficiently digested food, thoughts become

burdensome instead of nourishing.

Harmony of the stomach and spleen is the basis for healthy digestion. The stomach likes a wet environment, and the spleen likes it dry. The two Earth element organs must find common ground so they can get along and allow successful digestion.

Harmonization of the stomach and spleen is also reflective of interaction between the mind and emotions. That which we may be attracted to may be excessively "hot" or "damp," which will inevitably disturb one of the Earth organs.

Chapter One of the *Su Wen* advocates moderation in all aspects of life. Luo Vessels are indicators of areas we are either "hyper" or "hypo" engaged with. Too much emotional expression creates excessive heat that can disturb the alkalizing capacity of stomach yin; it can also consume the *qi* of the spleen. Excessive comfort-seeking can create a damp environment that inhibits the fire of the spleen; it can also create candida within the digestive tract, hampering assimilation. If we want to increase harmony within ourselves, we can examine our Luo Vessels for clues as to where we may be creating excess fire or damp through our lifestyles and reactions. The more we come to know and appreciate the psychological and physiological functions of our organs and channels, the more we can engage our *Shen* to harmonize our excesses and deficiencies.

Change is built on awareness. The first level of human existence is about survival. Survival functions occur unconsciously. The lung respirates whether we are aware of it or not. Same with our large intestine, stomach and spleen in digestion and elimination.

The second and third levels of human existence (interaction and differentiation) allow us to place conscious awareness into unconscious aspects of our physiology. The heart, small intestine, bladder and kidney continue the process of reflection that begins with the spleen. Through interaction, we develop the ability to see ourselves in the world and the world in ourselves. This awareness gives birth to the ability for conscious choice developed by the pericardium, triple heater, gallbladder and liver in the the level of differentiation.

By learning how our social psyche develops, we can begin to consciously change aspects of our lives that are making us unwell. If we believe our bodies naturally know how to function in a healthy manner, clearing our Luo Vessels will begin to restore integrity to unconscious functioning of the lung, large intestine, stomach and spleen.

The Dao is the way of nature. Nature understands balance and harmony. We possess this wisdom inherently: our Primary Channels know the way of the Dao. Yet, we easily become distracted, as represented by our Luo Vessels. Some say this is a reality built into our Ming. Herbal medicine teaches wherever a poisonous plant grows, an antidote also grows nearby. It may be our tendency to veer off-course from the Dao, but we also have powerful capacity to understand ourselves and find our way back.

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